

## **“Putting History to Work in the World”: the National Council on Public History**

John Dichtl, PhD, Department of History, and the NCPH  
Nicholas Sacco, MA candidate, Department of History, and the NCPH

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

For twenty-four years the National Council on Public History (NCPH) has been based in the Department of History as an external agency of IUPUI. A non-profit scholarly and professional group, with members across North America and in several other countries, NCPH serves public historians and promotes the burgeoning field of public history—which itself is an important form of civic engagement and translational research.

What is public history? It describes the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world. In this sense, it is history that is applied to real-world issues. While the theory and methodology of public history remain firmly in the discipline of history, and all good public history rests on sound scholarship, public historians routinely engage in collaborative work, conceptualize projects with a non-scholarly audience in mind, and typically frame their questions and evidence with the participation of these audiences. Some have shorthanded the definition of public history as “history outside of the classroom,” but increasingly the field or profession of public history moves back and forth between classrooms and the world beyond, involving historical consultants, museum professionals, government historians, archivists, oral historians, cultural resource managers, curators, film and media producers, historical interpreters, historic preservationists, policy advisers, local historians, and community activists, among many other job descriptions.

The national executive office of NCPH collaborates with the Department of History’s Public History Program, which is one of the best and oldest of the 138 MA programs in the United States. A half-time graduate student intern from the IUPUI Public History Program provides crucial assistance, and the executive director of NCPH, a faculty member, works with the Department’s Public History Program director and co-director on a range of projects. Recently these have included or will include chairing the 600-person NCPH conference in Nashville in 2016 and hosting it in Indianapolis in 2017, creating Careers in History symposia for undergraduates, and a phone app project providing historical tours of Indianapolis created with community partners and local public history institutions. The latter will become a statewide effort in conjunction with the Indiana’s 2016 Bicentennial.

NCPH helped launch a sister group, the International Federation for Public History, publishes the flagship peer-reviewed journal in the field, *The Public Historian*, issues best practice documents, organized the jointly produced “Tenure, Promotion, and the Publicly Engaged Academic Historian” report, maintains numerous digital and other venues for scholarly communication, recognizes cutting edge work with its annual awards program, and fosters many other ways of making the past useful in the present and to encouraging collaboration between historians and their public.